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ABSTRACT

Consciousness-raising as a prime rhetorical strategy of the women's liberation movement is examined. One goal of the women's liberation movement is to persuade women that they live in a state of oppression and, bringing them to this realization, to provide them with the means of breaking out of their psychological bondage. The consciousness-raising group, essentially small group discussion, is the most vital instrument by which the movement hopes to realize these goals. Bringing their lifetime experiences as women to the group, individuals interact through oral communication and exchange personal accounts and feelings. After participating in this communicative experience, the author argues, the women often become more aware of one another as people, learn to value themselves, and learn to view their role in the economic, social, and political arenas with new awareness. The language used in consciousness-raising is the language of oppression and dissatisfaction with the status-quo. A number of key terms in the vocabulary of consciousness-raising are analyzed. (LG)

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THE RHETORIC OF THE WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT:

CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING

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The women's liberation movement has as its purpose, altering woman's consciousness, and in such a way as to bring about deep and lasting social change. For this reason it is by its own design and intention a revolutionary movement, although not in the usual sense of the word. For the most part, rather than using violence as a means to transform social relationships and to create new political structures as Marx and Lenin did, the women's liberation movement wants to persuade woman that she lives in a state of oppression, and, bringing her to this realization, to provide her with the means of breaking the shackles of her psychological bondage. Once liberated she will be a new person in the human sense, and she will by her own right and through her own volition occupy a different position in society. An indispensable instrument by which the movement hopes to realize these sweeping changes is its rhetoric, and a primary way in which this is done, is through consciousness-raising.

Consciousness-raising is essentially small group discussion. Its goal is to enlighten women to their oppression by men, and its effect is the recruitment of women to the cause of women's liberation. Juliet Mitchell in Woman's Estate says that "many liberationists see consciousness-raising as one of the most important contributions of the movement to a new politics."[1]

A woman's decision to upset the status quo in her home, on her job, and in politics, is risky, and the group facilitates her determination to take a chance. It does so more dramatically than disseminating information through literature since, as has been shown in many studies,[2] groups have the proclivity to take greater risks than separate persons acting individually. Consciousness-raising helps women by allotting

them safe time and space to share their painful experiences and outraged feelings as members of the "second sex." Among the common themes voiced in consciousness-raising are those familiar to the women's movement. Women, for the most part, have internalized society's judgment of them, and have learned to value men more than other women. They have taken their identity from the man to whom they are attached, and view themselves as "the doctor's wife," or "Madeline's mother." Many women see the care of their house and children as valueless work; Germaine Greer calls women "the most oppressed class of life-contracted, unpaid workers."[3]

In consciousness-raising individual women learn their problems are not unique. Their difficulties in adjusting to demeaning day-to-day existence are shared by a class that has been relegated to an untenable position by the power structure: the personal is political.

A group in a discussion may be defined as: individuals interacting through oral communication, so that each member is aware of each other as a person; individuals accepting the common aspirations of the group as their own, and, thereby gaining some satisfaction from the accompaniment of the group's goals. Groups develop norms, and roles, and build interpersonal feelings. This results in the interdependence of members.[4] Consciousness-raising groups are composed solely of women for several reasons. First, it allows women to build feelings of sisterhood with other women without having men and thereby vying for attention and affection. Second, it results in a backlog of shared female experience from which every member of the group can draw. Third, it allows for a particularly honest, forthright, visceral exchange of feelings without the worry of tempering statements to preserve an image for males. Finally, as Boorman has noted, women in sexually integrated groups will

allow men to dominate the interactions; women alone will talk.

The groups generally meet in the homes of members. The evening often begins with casual conversation over wine or coffee. This facilitates interaction effectiveness and will presumably have a positive effect on the outcome of the discussion. Then, the small group comprising approximately five to twelve women meets formally. First, simple rules for effective group discussion are usually read. These are similar to guidelines found in most basic discussion texts. They admonish the members against interrupting, generalizing, discussing the experiences of friends, and particularly for consciousness-raising groups, against interpreting another woman's experiences for her. They encourage members to allow every person to talk very specifically about their life experiences, to talk only about what they themselves have witnessed and felt, and to immediately step in if any rules are broken.

The leadership of the group ranges from <u>laissez faire</u> to democratic. Someone, generally an older member in the movement, is in charge of beginning the meeting, stating the previously arranged agenda and bringing any material. Autocratic leadership is absolutely shunned, as it runs counter to everything that the women's liberation movement stands for. The movement encourages women to renounce their culturally learned passivity and childlike dependence, and take on responsibility, function independently of others, and act like the adults they are in taking initiative and action. The group has a commitment to stay together for a certain period of time, and after the membership has stabilized, they may to decide not to admit new members until they have completed their selected goals. The members of the group decide on their own agenda, usually formulated at a previous meeting, and are encouraged to think about the topic so that they have a partially formed

idea of what they want to say. Sample topics are: why did you marry your husband? How do you feel about being married? Have you ever used illness as an excuse not to have sex? Have you ever been pressured into sex? Have you ever faked an orgasm? The materials that members bring are their feelings about their life-time experiences as women, and they share their often disturbing recollections of their lives with the group. "Resistances to Consciousness"[5] may be considered. They are defenses such as thinking your man is the exception and thinking you are a spared woman. The enemy must be named, and that enemy is "man" individually and collectively. Interaction sometimes takes the form of "giving testimony" a symposium technique where each woman in succession discusses at length a certain topic and then is questioned for clarifying details by the others. Interactions may be more spontaneous, however, with women speaking until they have made a contribution, and other women at random continuing with related statements. Although this method is livelier, going around the circle and allowing each woman to give testimony usually solicits more contributions from lower participators. Nevertheless, either way the discussion is conducted, lower contributors are always given ample opportunity to speak. There is a commitment to stick to the topic of the evening, although other subjects may be considered after the subject has been discussed. At the end of each session, members attempt to generalize from the common testimony they have heard, in order to formulate concepts about woman's estate. They might also share observations about what changes need to be made in society in order to eradicate the injustices that have been disclosed. The composition of the group, aside from being all-female, is usually homogeneous, as there are frequently several groups in town, and a woman hearing of a

group through social contact or publicity, will naturally join a group with persons similar to herself.

What the effects of consciousness-raising as a group process are, is seen in the existence of forces toward conformity;[6] that conformity is towards liberated thinking and activity.

The language of consciousness-raising has a special vocabulary which binds the group together and gives it unity and a sense of identity. Just as the rhetoric of the political revolutionist is a language of indignation, agitation and change, so too is the rhetoric of consciousness-raising. The function of the new rhetoric is "to use words to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents."[7] This is precisely how the rhetoric of consciousness-raising works. Members of the group are reluctant at first to use this new language, but they are soon persuaded to it. These new symbols work on the participants to awaken them to their oppression and then to act.

In discussing the rhetoric of the women's liberation movement, and thus of consciousness-raising, it is valuable to examine certain key terms, each of which is rooted in the ideology of the movement, and also is an agent to convert that ideology into palpable, human, and social fact. The terms crucial for the sake of analysis are: oppression, male chauvinism, objectification, and perhaps the most critical of all, consciousness-raising.

Consciousness-raising is this decade's favorite word;[8] it is the word of the future which has captured the collective imagination of our society. The dictionary meaning of consciousness is "the essence or totality of attitudes, opinions, and sensitivities held or thought to be held by an individual or group."[9] Interestingly, the term consciousness-raising came to have its particular and special meaning in women's liberation from the communal movement of the Chinese

revolution. Peasant cadres trained themselves to go out and work revolution among the population. These groups, "speaking their bitterness, took the important step of raising the consciousness of the people to whom they addressed themselves, and thereby bringing about a new self-understanding and a heightened self-esteem. In its very different context, this is precisely what the women's liberation movement attempts to do through consciousness-raising. Its purpose is to persuade women that, like the Chinese peasants, they have lived in a state of oppression, and have, in fact, internalized a set of values that have perpetuated that oppression.

Male chauvinism as a concept is indissolubly connected to the idea of consciousness-raising. Lexically, chauvinism means "militant and boastful devotion to and glorification of one's country."[10] The male chauvinist, according to the women's liberation movement, is devoted to, and glories in, the supremacy that he enjoys, often without realizing it, and that he assumes to be his natural right. The goal in consciousness-raising is to make women aware of the fact of male supremacy, and rhetorically the way this is realized, is to put the label male chauvinism on the attitudes that traditionally have supported that supremacy. Once women recognize male chauvinism for what it is, they will have reached the first level of forging a new consciousness.

To objectify, in dictionary usage is "to present something as an object; impart reality to; externalize or make objective."[11] In the women's liberation movement objectification means that men treat women as objects which they can manipulate. The most obvious level on which this manipulation operates is the sexual one, but it extends to many other areas of life as well, and reveals itself in what are seemingly innocent, but are nonetheless insidious ways, and are, in their human result, degrading. Men impart reality to women through the roles that

they choose to assign them, and having done so, they create a powerful and effective means of control. Once woman has been externalized as cunt, "a woman regarded as a sexual object,"[12] and once she has been objectified as breeder and mother, she has been stripped of her individuality and dignity. In fact, the very labels the members of women's liberation apply to themselves and to other females differ markedly from the terms used by the population to designate women as objects.

Uninitiated women often talk about their experiences with "the girls" and men, out of deference to the "second sex" refer to "the ladies." As women go through consciousness-raising, they discover that both terms denigrate them. Because they assume their grown up status, men rarely refer to their male friends as "the boys." "The girls" suggests that women are overgrown children, play acting, and not responsible human beings. "Ladies" implies strict role playing; ladies wear frilly hats and white gloves, cross their legs at the ankle, and are well bra'd and girdled to hold in any suggestion of sexuality or sensuality; they cannot use or even hear certain words which might offend their sensibilities. Ladies are invisible, colorless, and repressed; they are doomed to play secondary roles to the active males in society. Woman, "an adult female human being"[13] is the counterpart to man, which suggests full adulthood and free choice of action, behavior, and responsibility. Women want their true humanity and worth acknowledged, and consciousness-raising makes them aware of how labels either put them down or endow them with full human dignity. After consciousness-raising members see themselves as "women."

Perhaps the most controversial word in the rhetoric of the women's liberation movement and of consciousness-raising is oppression. To imply

that woman is "subjugated or persecuted by man"[14] is to put many people, both men and women, on the defensive. The person who has not thought about the questions that the movement has raised, but is exposed now and then to its rhetoric, does not like to hear that he or she is either oppressor or oppressed. Not only do individuals not like to see themselves in these roles, but they feel that one of society's most basic institutions, the family, is undercut if oppression is at the root of normal male-female relationships. Another objection to the use of the word oppression in consciousness-raising is the idea that the oppressed members of society are not the middle class white women who make up a large part of the women's movement, but Blacks, Puerto Ricans, and other minority groups who live under grim conditions in the ghettos of our cities. Yet, the women's liberation movement insists that women are oppressed---economically, politically, psychologically, sexually, and socially by the authoritative, male-dominated world.

The rhetoric of consciousness-raising, which is at the heart of the rhetoric of women's liberation, is one of the most vital instruments of an ideology whose purpose is to liberate women from their oppression, and thereby bring about social change.

FOOTNOTES

1. Juliet Mitchell, Woman's Estate. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), p. 61.

2. See for example those cited by Allen Teger and Dean Pruitt in "Components of Group Risk Taking," in Small Group Communication: A Reader, edited by Robert Cathcart and Larry Samovar. (Dubuque, Iowa: W. C. Brown Co., 1970).

3. Germaine Greer, The Female Eunuch. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), p. 327.

4. Halbert Gulley, Discussion, Conference and Group Process. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1960), p. 254.

5. Irene Peslikis, "Resistances to Consciousness," in Sisterhood is Powerful, edited by Robin Morgan. (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), p. 337.

6. See for example Milton Horowitz and Howard Perlmutter, "The Discussion Group and Democratic Behavior," in Small Group Communication: A Reader, p. 35.

7. Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives. (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1950), p. 41.

8. See recent issues of Psychology Today.

9. American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, edited by William Morris. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1969), p. 283.

10. Ibid. p. 229.

11. Ibid. p. 905.

12. Ibid. p. 322.

13. Ibid. p. 1472

14. Ibid. p. 922.